

# The King's Highway

*Being an Episode in the Life of Dick Ryder, Otherwise Galloping Dick, Sometime Gentleman of the Road*

## The Woman with a Squint

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

THERE is none that hath a more tender heart to a woman than I, and none that hath a better eye to one, neither. I am of a fastidious taste and habit, and would think shame to set myself up with blowzy wenches such as any man may come by in a venture. I would sooner pine through life like an anchorite than be fubbed off with Mrs. Mealy Face or Madam Scrag. But I will confess, on t'other hand, that a pretty Kinsey Winsie tickles me mightily, and I admire looks in a wench, even if they are not for me, or be a trifle stark and strait faced, or hail from another quarter.

And it is that weakness of mine that has had me, damme, into some predicaments that have proved troublesome. Yet I do not set that encounter with the woman with the squint among such troubles; for, faith, in a way I may be said to have enjoyed it. At least, I look back upon it after a time with some hilarity, for I can shake my sides at her and that red head, and at myself too, Dick Ryder, that was often a fool where women were concerned, but kept an even head for all that, as the world does very well know. Not but what I was out of temper at the time and swore like any horse trooper or Gipsy tinker.

'Twas of a summer evening, and I was turned towards London, pretty contented, and full of wine and good humor, and a-singing of a stave out of a merry heart and with a voice that I would not wager to be overtrue or steady. But so I came out upon the open green by Walton, and, struck of a sudden with caution, reined in, and stood there with my ear to the wind, listening. For there was a brave noise came whistling up the road, and before me through a row of pollard willows, all a-green with gray green streamers, was a concourse of folk; and a clamor of shouting and laughter and the devil knows what confusion of sound was in the air.

"Hulloa!" says I to myself. "Here's old King Christmas come again, or, rip me, 'tis the sweeps' May day!" And I jogged the mare along, curious to observe what might be afoot. 'Twas a loud circle of spectators congregated about a dirty pond, and over the tops of their heads I could make out the figure of a woman swinging in some trap or box; or so it seemed. And being perplexed to make out what was forward, and t'others about being taken up with the spectacle, whatso'er it might be, and oblivious of me, I leaped off the mare and took hold of a man that was giggling, by the ear.

"Stop this silly cackling," says I, "and tell me what's amiss!"

He cries out for his ear, and would have made off with an expression of fear on his face, but I held him by the arm.

"Nay, man, I will not mince you," said I to reassure the cully; "but what's this prayer meeting? And is it tragedy or comedy?—for I have a mind to enjoy so cheap a show."

"Oh," says he, recovering his ease and grinning, "'tis all for nothing, and you can laugh as much as you will."

"Well," says I impatiently, "maybe I will open my mouth when I know what's what. Open yours," says I, "and interpret like a good citizen, or, stab me! I'll plant politeness and wits both perforce on that honest brow."

"'Tis a woman that is took for a shrew," says he, edging away, "and her neighbors are for curing her."

"Curing her!" said I. "Why, a scold's a scold, and there's an end on't; and you may not make swipes into good wine nor vinegar into honey. Best let her alone," says I, "and save your pains."

At that he began to giggle again. "Hee, hee!" he tittered, "they be going to duck her," says this lump. "Marry," he says, "how she squawks like a parrot when she dips!"

much! I should think shame to contemplate thus the ill usage of a wench."

"Come, no offense," says the big man awkwardly enough,—"the Lord made man master of his own house. You must admit that."

"Why, yes," I said; "but not to trample upon woman."

"Trample!" said he, and eyed me and the red headed fool that was sprawling to get away from me foolishly. He laughed in a loutish fashion. "Nay," said he, "there was no liberty to trample on the sex, that's for sure," and he laughed again.

That nettled me in my condition of good liquor; and so said I, throwing the little man to the ground, where he fell on his face and dirtied it, "Sir, I'll warrant no man pulls a joke at me and goes to bed comfortable that night."

"You go off at half cock," said he deprecatingly; "'tis plain you know not the circumstances."

"There is no circumstance," said I loudly, and glaring round me at the knot that had gathered, "that would justify any man to ill treat woman; no, nor to suffer it," I added hotly.

At that moment a cry came to us over the heads of the crowd, and the little man hastily pushed his way among the spectators to see what it might be; but t'other says with a sneer, "Well, what might you be doing?" said he.

Now this took me aback for the moment, seeing that I had clean forgot the scene that was forward in the argument; and so I looked him in the face with its grin. I do not suppose the cully had meant to arouse me; for 'twas surely the last thing he would imagine I should be at in such company as that. However, whether he expected such behavior or not, he got it, for I pricked myself of a sudden on the thought, and, jumping on the mare, pushed her forward.

"You remind me," said I, calling back to him, "I have my duty, and not to bandy words with a sheep's head. Make way there, damme," said I to the crowd, "or I will ride over you, you bleating wethers!"

There were some women in the throng—more shame to them!—but the more part was of men, whose blood ran as cold, I'll warrant, as ever blood in the Sultan's black janizaries. So I made 'em part, and used my whip and Calypso's heels so that they fled with cries, cursing me. But I laughed, and emerged at last on the pond's brink.

A burly fellow in a dingy coat stood there with a rope in his hand that ran through a pole and upon which swung the ducking stool, and in this was bound a woman with a green kirtle and a white face. Just as I came out of my shifting lane the bumpkin that was some sort of plowman raises one of his huge arms, and, "Send her pop!" says he. "Pop! she goes again!" he says.

One that was with him took hold of the rope as if it were an honor to officiate in that play; and with a run the stool slipped into the water of the pond, and the woman was doused below it, disappearing over her tumbled hair. When she came up she let forth something 'twixt a sigh and a gurgle, but no cry. She would ha' cried for mercy in vain from that pack of jackals, and maybe she had proved it. But maybe also she was of a spirit to bite on her teeth lest she should minister to the entertainment of her persecutors.

'Twas this very sigh that went to my midriff, and I was in a storm to see any woman so baited; and the more for that now the water dripping from



I Jogged Off with Her Still on the Pommel Before Me.

"What!" said I, pricking up my ears at this. "Is't a ducking stool they are swinging?"

"Aye," said he, with his giggle, and passed through the spectators eagerly as if he would lose no jot of the transactions.

I observed him, meditating, while the wine warmed my temper. He was an undersized fellow, with a shock red head, and he danced about on his thin, bandy legs like a monkey on hot bricks. I grabbed him by the small of the back.

"Keep ye still," said I, "you muckworm! What grasshopper are you to go flying off ere you answer a gentleman properly? What's this woman, and where is she?"

"She is there," he said, wriggling in my grasp; "and you can see her if you will, without forfeiting a groat."

"Think you, you worm," said I, "that it would tickle me to see a woman weep or hear a wench squeal?"

At that he was silent gaping; but screwed his eyes about towards the pond as if reluctant to miss the spectacle.

"And a pretty lobster you are," said I, girding at him, "to take delight in a woman's ill fortune and ill usage!" and I shook him like a rat in a dog's mouth. And that drew the eyes of some near us.

"Let the man be," says one big fellow, "or we will serve you the same, my master!"

"Serve me the same, would you?" said I, turning on him, but dragging the red headed bantam by the belly band after me. "Damme, I will enlarge the bubukles on that conch of yours, if so be you talk so